

SECT CHILDREN ARE USED TO ABUSE

By [Jeane MacIntosh](#)

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For some children of the Twelve Tribes, the beatings begin in infancy and sometimes don't stop until they're old enough to have kids of their own. They start working as young as 2 or 3, and by 13 or 14 are expected to quit home-schooling to work alongside their parents, making the candles and furniture sold to finance the group headed by 63-year-old leader Elbert Eugene Spriggs.

"It's not much of a childhood," says Anne, a former member whose identity is being withheld at her request.

Now near 30, Anne's family joined Twelve Tribes when she was 5. She left the controlling, fringe religious sect a few years ago, but still has horrific nightmares about an abusive childhood spent shuttling between communes in Vermont, Massachusetts and New York.

"In the cult, there are fathers who can't wait to start beating their children," she says. "They'll start as early as four months old. Babies are hit for crying, for not taking naps. When you get older, you're beaten any time you misbehave."

Former members say Spriggs believes children should be spanked before eight months old. Crying, playing make-believe, talking back, and slacking off on chores are all grounds for punishment.

"For us, it was just a way of life, and I was considered a very disobedient kid," says Anne, who says her frequent beatings often left her bruised.

Children of the "community," as Twelve Tribes calls itself, work alongside parents as toddlers, and older kids are often put in charge of the younger kids.

Anne worked in the candle factory, and says now, "I'll tell you this – I'll never work for free again."

According to several sources, children rarely get medical attention.

“We got sick a lot – it happens when you live in close quarters like that,” says Anne. “One year we all got whooping cough and another year we all got Hepatitis A. But I never once saw a doctor.”

Physical games, like basketball, are sometimes allowed, but toys are forbidden because Spriggs believes children should remain rooted in reality.

Spriggs convinces his flock that he is their only conduit to heaven, and former members fear they will die because they’ve left.

“There are nights I don’t sleep at all, other nights I wake up screaming from nightmares,” Anne said.

Anne says she also has trouble making friends, and struggles with making decisions and voicing an opinion, things that were discouraged in Twelve Tribes.

“I still say to people, ‘Just tell me what to do,’ because I’m so conditioned.”